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Mignon R. Moore

Lipstick or Timberlands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities

Consider the ways in which the following women explain gender presentation in one black lesbian community:

> Asa Bambir (age 34, executive assistant):[1] In New York I saw more of this butch-femme thing and I was a little floored by it, a little shocked, like why do people have to play these roles? . . . But at the same time I looked at it in awe because there was a part of my childhood when I really liked wearing boyish clothes, but I never did. . . . So, I was very intrigued by it, and I think over the years I've just been allowing that to surface. I really do like wearing boyish clothes. *Were you drawn to women who were more feminine looking or less feminine looking?* I was definitely drawn to women who were feminine looking, very feminine looking.
>
> Lynn Witherspoon (age 33, corporate attorney): When I first started to come out . . . it was interesting because I had this type that I was attracted to, and yet when I was going out I was always attracting the more butch looking women. And I was like, "Oh, I'm carrying this purse," and all of these other things, you know, all these things you do in the straight community. So I had to change the way I dressed, and I stopped carrying a purse, and I was able to find women who I was more attracted to, to go out with. When I first came out I was wearing makeup; I stopped wearing makeup.

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[1] Pseudonyms are used to protect respondents' anonymity. Following Kath Weston's (2004) model, I assign surnames to this study's participants to convey a sense of respect and adult status not always afforded sexual or racial minority group members.

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> Trina Adams (age 32, hotel associate): In most relationships there is one that is more feminine than the other. For some reason that is just the way it is. I've never seen two aggressives together.[2] I've seen two feminine women living together, but one is always more aggressive. As you talk to them and you are around them more you realize that one woman is more aggressive. I don't like the labels, but they exist. Because I mean we are just gay, and I don't know who started the labels, but it is what it is.

These excerpts are revealing in a few important ways. They acknowledge that there are various physical representations of gender in black lesbian communities. They suggest that these portrayals of gender are not arbitrary but in some salient way order or structure women's expectations for and within relationships. In most cases, feminine-looking women partner with women who are not as feminine in their physical style and mannerisms. The excerpts also show that, even when women have a preference for a particular gendered display, some do not like to acknowledge the significance of categories and their meanings for their personal preferences. At least some women present contradictory stories regarding the existence of gendered selves within the community and the significance of gender display in their private desires.

Regardless of sexual preference, everyone has a presentation of self she uses to convey messages to others. This article critically examines the existence and meanings of gender presentation among black lesbians in New York.[3] It argues that for several reasons, and despite what we have seen among lesbian-feminists, many black gay women in the 1970s did

[2] Although the word *aggressive* is ordinarily used to describe a personality trait or behavior, the terms *aggressive*, *aggressor*, or *AG* are labels many black lesbians in New York use to indicate a woman who has a masculine presentation of self. Jill Johnston (1973) makes reference to the term *aggressive* as part of a dichotomy of aggressive-passive behavior that butches and femmes were expected to enact in their relationships. Johnston found that less feminine lesbians had more freedom to their sexual and sensual needs in casual intimate encounters, while their more feminine partners were limited to the more passive role during sex. In the context of the current study, the *aggressive* category of gender presentation is similar in meaning to *butch* or *stud* from prior generations, though it does not necessarily indicate someone who is sexually assertive in relationships. The use of the label *aggressive* is class biased, and many middle-class or upwardly mobile lesbians strongly dislike the term.

[3] The terms *physical presentation of gender*, *gender presentation*, and *gender display* are used interchangeably throughout the text following Judith Lorber's definition of presentation of self as "a certain kind of gendered norm through dress, cosmetics, adornments, and permanent and reversible body marks" (1994, 31). This gender display may be represented not just through clothing but also through physical markers such as hairstyle, body language (i.e., way of walking), mannerisms (i.e., way of talking), and other expressions of self.

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not distance themselves from the use of physical presentations of gender as an organizing mechanism for their relationships and for lesbian community life.[4] As a result, today we see a modification of the older butch and femme identities expressed in one of three fairly distinct categories. Unlike what others have found in contemporary analyses of gender display among whites (Faderman 1992; Weston 1993), presentations of self among black lesbians are not mere sexual play. Once formed, the gender style women choose tends to remain consistent over time and helps structure interactions and expectations in gay social settings.

Separate spheres: 1970s lesbian-feminism and black lesbian identity

After the 1960s, the association between lesbian identity and the women's liberation movement intersected so much that lesbian-feminist perspectives on gay identity began to overshadow the experiences of lesbians who were unconnected to that movement, gay women whose lives were being shaped by other events in their social worlds. Black women-identified women were one group of lesbians who were never fully indoctrinated into the particular type of feminism espoused during the 1960s and 1970s. Most research referencing that era has not documented well how lesbian-feminist ideologies subsequently influenced black gay communities, though works by Anita Cornwell (1983), Barbara Smith (1983), and Audre Lorde (1984) are important exceptions. Nevertheless, we do have historical accounts of the conflicted feelings shared by black and white lesbians as they struggled with whether and how black women would participate in the lesbian-feminist subgroup of the women's liberation movement (Breines 2002).[5]

[4] White lesbians, particularly women younger than forty, are less likely than in previous years to identify as lesbian-feminists, instead preferring queer identities (Warner 1993). However, research on lesbian relationships and particularly on women in lesbian-headed households continues to find that these women organize their relationships around the general feminist principle of an egalitarian distribution of paid labor and unpaid housework that allows partners to exercise "similar degrees of influence in family decision making" (Sullivan 2004, 100).

[5] While black women could in some ways relate to gender oppression as defined by the women's movement, other issues that were a platform for lesbian-feminism were not as relevant to them, and many were not convinced that it served their best interests (Morrison 1971). During the 1960s and 1970s black lesbians were concerned with issues such as police brutality and jobs that would facilitate black socioeconomic mobility, issues that had a direct impact on the racially segregated communities in which they lived (Combahee River Collective 1982). They could not disentangle their needs from those in larger black communities, but many leaders in the women's movement felt that these issues did not belong on a platform

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Perhaps the most observable consequence of the development of black lesbian communities outside white lesbian-feminist influences is seen in the persistence and meanings of gendered presentations of self among black gay women. In their efforts to assimilate into the larger women's movement, 1970s lesbian-feminists took a stance that was disparaging of feminine and masculine gender display among lesbians and encouraged women to move toward androgynous gender presentations (Brown 1972). Butch and femme roles were said to have been silenced in all but the toughest lesbian communities (Loulan 1990). As a group, black lesbians were less engaged in the public bar culture that defined many white working-class women's experiences; instead, they primarily socialized with one another at private house parties in their own racially segregated neighborhoods (Thorpe 1996).[6] Black lesbians maintained a physical distance from white lesbian-feminists and were less often subjected to the assaults directed at gender presentation in their relationships. Since many black women were never fully part of white lesbian-feminist leadership or on

concerned with women's liberation (Bennett and Gibbs 1980). Deborah King argues that black women were reluctant to articulate a feminist consciousness publicly because they saw an alignment with something labeled *feminism* as antithetical to an exclusive commitment to racial interests (1988, 55). White patriarchy also competed with other oppressions based on race, which left many black lesbians outside the boundaries and influence of 1970s lesbian-feminism. For instance, during this time black women were employed in significant numbers as private household workers and in related jobs controlled by white middle- and upper-class women (Mullings 1997). This type of racial and class hierarchy among women made it difficult for blacks and whites to see all or even most of their interests as mutual (Breines 2002). In addition to patriarchal domination by white men in larger society, black women were also combating gender discrimination in black liberation movements, discrimination that fell outside of the experiences of white women. Many white women in the women's movement believed that their perspectives and concerns were not heard by black women and felt that black women refused to validate the gendered oppression they—white women—were experiencing in society (Gwendolyn 1980). Reports from white women said that black women wanted their own issues at the forefront of the movement and wanted to blame white women for their subjugation instead of directing that anger toward men (Calderone and Charoula 1980). This difference in perspective and opinion has never been fully resolved and serves to maintain distance and feelings of mistrust between the two groups.

[6] Rochella Thorpe (1996) documents the lesbian house parties that dominated lesbian life in black Detroit from 1940 to 1975. While the history of the gay African American experience has been poorly documented, we know that an extensive, private, and racially homogeneous social life has existed for black lesbians outside of the public bars, restaurants, and nightclubs at least as early as the 1920s in Harlem (Garber 1990); the 1930s in Detroit (*Living with Pride* 1999); the 1940s in Washington, DC (Beemyn 1997), and Buffalo (Kennedy and Davis 1993); the 1950s in Queens, New York (Lorde 1983); and at least since the 1980s for West Indian lesbians and gays in Kingston, Jamaica (unpublished author interview with Sifa Brody, Brooklyn, New York, October 25, 2003).

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board with all of its goals, they were less influenced by efforts to replace butch and femme identities with androgynous presentations of self.

Cornwell, writing as a black lesbian-feminist in the early 1970s, suggests this point of black women remaining largely outside of the women's movement and therefore not being strongly affected by feminist philosophies regarding lesbian relationships. Cornwell recounts the time when her friend referred to Cornwell as a *stud*, a term used in black lesbian communities to denote a lesbian with nonfeminine style and mannerisms. Cornwell was critical of the label, did not want it used to identify her, and felt frustrated that members of her group of friends were relating to other lesbians in that way. She credits the persistence of these gendered categories with black women's distance from the feminist movement: "Not surprisingly, fear of encountering racism seems to be one of the main reasons that so many Black womyn refuse to join the Womyn's Movement. This is especially unfortunate for the Black Lesbians because, unless they have come across Feminist ideas from somewhere, they are apt to remain in the old rut of sexual role-playing that apparently affects all traditional Lesbian circles" (Cornwell 1983, 12). It is clear from Cornwell's writings that she believed that 1970s black lesbians were not being sufficiently influenced by lesbian-feminist ideologies regarding gender identities, and as a feminist she found this problematic.

I have found very little published research analyzing gender presentation in black lesbian communities during and after the 1970s women's movement. Ann Allen Shockley (1983) writes more generally about the dearth of scholarship by and about black lesbians, saying that they are not written about as literary subjects because white female writers are concerned with making their own voices and experiences heard, because black female writers give priority to writing about racism, and because those who have written about lesbian themes have had difficulty getting those works published. One major issue for black women writing about lesbians has been the fear of being identified by other blacks as "gay, queer, funny, or a bulldagger" (Shockley 1983, 84). Shockley says these names are "embedded deeply within the overall homophobic attitude of the Black community, a phenomenon stemming from social, religious, and 'biological' convictions" (84).

Makeda Silvera (1992) reports experiences as a lesbian in Toronto's Afro-Caribbean communities that are similar to what Shockley found in the United States nearly a decade earlier. The harshest, most critical language about black lesbians is reserved for women with a nonfeminine presentation of self. These women have always been the face of lesbian identity, bearing the brunt of the hostility and misunderstanding for the

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group. The fear of stigmatization from one's own group members can be paralyzing, particularly when those whose opinions matter most, those to whom one feels closest, and those to whom one turns for support and protection from outsiders become one's harshest critics. Cheryl Clarke agrees, saying that because black gay people have always contributed significantly to the well-being of black communities, "it is exceedingly painful for us to face public denunciation from black folk—the very group who should be championing our liberation" (1983, 207).

The double transgression of acting on same-sex desires and defying societal norms of femininity has rarely been publicly acknowledged or analyzed in research on black lesbians, and this may be due to an effort to protect black women from having their behaviors categorized as deviant or nonnormative. Historically, raced notions of women's sexuality, morality, temperament, beauty, and behavior have portrayed black womanhood as the inferior other relative to the normative status of white womanhood.[7] Susan K. Cahn's (1994) argument that racially polarized axes have historically imparted greater masculinity to black women athletes based on their work history as slaves, sharecroppers, domestics, and laborers also explains the reluctance of researchers to consider the significance of gendered categories among black sexual minorities. The fear is that racist ideology will be validated and used to marginalize and debase their behaviors and experiences. Even in a broader context of lesbian identity and experience, where gendered presentations of self exist among women of all racial groups, there is a fear that calling attention to and analyzing the experiences of black gay women will result in an interpretation of their actions as opposing or inferior to those of white lesbians. However, we cannot let fear prevent a scholarly inquiry into patterns and experiences that may produce new knowledge on an understudied, sociologically relevant, and important group.

Gender performance in lesbian relationships

How have we come to understand contemporary forms of gender performance in lesbian relationships? With respect to analyses of butch and femme roles, this field was silenced after the 1970s women's movement (Loulan 1990). However, in the early 1990s we witnessed a return to the analysis of gender presentation among lesbians. Feminist scholars began

[7] For work on raced notions of femininity and interpretations of black sexuality as pathological, deviant, or masculine, see Cahn (1994); Hammonds (1997); Somerville (2000); and Collins (2004).

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to document what was framed as a "resurgence of gendered fashion" (Stein 1992, 434) or a revival (Faderman 1992, 579) of butch and femme presentations of self. In this camp of second-wave constructionists, sharply differentiated gender styles were no longer analyzed as expressions of intensely personal experiences around sexual identity as they had been in pre-1970s understandings of butch and femme. Instead, gender display was interpreted as a less serious form of sexual amusement. Categories of gender display were said to be more ambiguous than in past generations, and researchers saw more choice in the types of gender presentation lesbians create (see, e.g., Stein 1992). As a result of this work, differences in gender presentation among lesbians are now seen as frivolous play on cultural representations of gender and not strongly linked to a personal identity or structure of norms for a community (Weston 1993).

This perspective of contemporary gender display is actually consistent with 1970s lesbian-feminist interpretations of gender presentation that reduce the significance of those aspects of women's experience that relate to maleness or masculinity, particularly masculine physical presentations in women. By labeling these presentations of self as play or performance rather than considering a more serious meaning of their representation or their function within a social group, they suggest that gender presentation no longer organizes lesbian life in any concrete way (Eves 2004). In the late 1990s, we began to see theoretical challenges to this perspective. Particularly noteworthy is Judith Halberstam's (1998) work on female masculinity and Judith Butler's seminal work in queer theory (1999), which problematized the very tenet of feminist theory that questioned the legitimacy of gendered behavior within any particular gender group. However, the field remains lacking in empirical analyses of whether and how gender presentation structures relationships in contemporary gay communities.[8]

My work looks inside one population of lesbians to explore whether and how gender presentation is perceived and enacted in their social world and to uncover one way identity processes operate in black lesbian communities. It describes three dominant physical presentations of gender and examines their meanings in relation to one another, across working- and middle-class black communities, and in relation to butch and femme definitions in this area of study. It links these gender presentations to raced notions of black masculinity and femininity. Almost twenty-five years ago, Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith (1982) emphasized

[8] Laurie Essig's (1999) ethnographic account of gay and lesbian identity in Russia is one important exception.

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the importance of finding the "lesser-known" black woman (Griffin 1999, xiii). It is my hope that in describing and analyzing gender presentation among black lesbians we will locate and make visible other groups of overlooked women, producing new knowledge that can be placed in a broader context of research in the interrelated fields of gender studies; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) studies; and African American studies.

Obtaining a sample of black lesbians

New York, unlike the majority of towns and cities where black gay couples live, is an ideal place in which to study black gay populations because at least one public social event takes place almost every day of the week that specifically caters to the perceived interests of black lesbians.[9] I purposefully concentrated my outreach efforts on predominantly black and Latina social groups rather than on predominantly white lesbian activities that also draw nonwhite women. Given the tendency for researchers who study gay families to be white and to recruit participants from their own social networks, this strategy is ideal for locating black women who are not part of predominantly white networks and are therefore understudied.

I began this research by spending time at a variety of public social events that included after-work networking cocktail hours, karaoke socials, church meetings, book clubs, art salons, shared meals, poetry readings, parties, and workshops on parenting and adoption. I also attended gay pride and black gay pride events in Brooklyn; Manhattan; Washington, DC; Atlanta; and Orlando, Florida; all of these draw large crowds of black women from New York.[10] At the start of this fieldwork I was not sure how the study would evolve—I was meeting working-class and low-income lesbians in the South Bronx, middle- and upper-middle-class black gay women in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood, older black lesbians in Harlem, and adolescents with LGBT identities at the pier off of Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. As I began to delve further into these women's lives, I discovered intricate, multilayered, and expansive networks of black gay women whose

[9] The 2000 census allowed researchers to identify black same-sex couples in various census tracts across the country. The cities with the greatest number of black same-sex unmarried partner households are New York; Washington, DC–Baltimore; Chicago; Atlanta; and Los Angeles. Between 2002 and 2004 I spoke with black organization leaders and party promoters in these cities about the types of social activities that attract black lesbians. None of these cities had more public social events that were predominantly black than New York did.

[10] I also attended a black gay pride event in Toronto, where the majority of blacks are of West Indian descent (Ornstein 2000, 12, table 1).

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social activities occasionally involved intermingling with whites but who led complex lives within these predominantly black social groups. Eventually I decided to focus my efforts on how black gay women formed relationships and maintained families in predominantly black communities. This work is part of a larger project that emphasizes the formation, development, and maintenance of black lesbian–headed families (Moore 2005).

When I began this research, I was not familiar with the black lesbian community in New York and had had very few experiences with black gay communities more generally. I write from the perspective of both an insider (by virtue of my race and sexuality) as well as an outsider, or someone with no knowledge of the norms and practices of this group.[11] At the start of this work I did not know any of the women in the study, knew very few lesbians, and had not participated in any of the social activities in this community. I was soon invited into the friendship groups of some and introduced to others who did not participate as frequently in these public events. These more private women hosted parties and other activities in their own homes, and many of these events bore a striking resemblance to the vibrant portraits painted by Lorde (1983) of 1950s black lesbian life. I began taking field notes in May 2002, approximately four months after learning about these activities. One year later, I began talking informally with my contacts about their involvement with other forms of data collection.

There are populations that traditional methods of data gathering will not capture, and the black lesbian community is one such group. Public advertisements, notices, flyers at lesbian nightclubs, or postings at LGBT community centers largely go unnoticed or unanswered by gay populations of color, and studies that use these methods are not successful in recruiting significant numbers of nonwhites in their samples. By spending time in predominantly black social events, I was able to recruit individuals for the more formal methods of data collection in the study.

The study targeted women currently living in New York and the surrounding metropolitan area who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, in "the life," or women loving women who are forming families. They are either in committed relationships with other women or are gay mothers. To be eligible for the study, one person in the relationship had to identify as

[11] Prior to conducting this study I had spent the majority of my adult life in graduate school and doing postdoctoral work outside of New York, where my social networks consisted primarily of colleagues and students. Hardly any were black gay women, and to my knowledge none were significantly involved in New York's public black gay life.

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black or Latina. I collected four types of data: (1) participant-observation fieldwork gathered over a period of approximately thirty months; (2) focus groups on four areas of study: black lesbian identity, family life in households with children, gender presentation in relationships, and the influence of religious background on individual sexuality; (3) a fourteen-page mail-in survey of one hundred women who answered demographic and family background information, questions about the methods they have used or considered to obtain children, the division of household and economic labor in the home, relationship quality, changes in the respondents' sexuality over time, physical representations of gender, experiences with female and male partners, and the extent and nature of their friendship groups and social interactions in black communities, gay communities, and predominantly white communities;[12] and (4) findings from in-depth, semistructured interviews with fifty-six of the women who participated in the mail-in survey. The more process-oriented, detailed information provided by the interviews complemented the broader data of the survey.[13] I used a variety of collection strategies to create a multidimensional portrait that would help me evaluate behavioral patterns over time and allow me to capture not only how respondents said they behaved but also their actual behavior, which I observed repeatedly over a thirty-month period.

Black and lesbian in New York

Black is not a monolithic racial category, and the diversity of my respondents reflects this point. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) are black American, 20 percent identify as West Indian or Caribbean, and 10 percent are Latina.[14] Twenty-two percent of my respondents are foreign born. They range in age from twenty-one to sixty-one years old, with a mean age of thirty-six. The overwhelming majority live in neighborhoods with substantial black and Latino populations. Thirty-six percent report completing high school, 29 percent hold a bachelor's degree, and one-third hold a

[12] One hundred and thirty-two surveys were distributed and one hundred were returned, giving the study a response rate of 80 percent.

[13] Each partner was interviewed separately by a black female researcher. I was the primary interviewer, but in cases where both partners were interviewed simultaneously I employed one of three black female graduate research assistants whom I trained in face-to-face interview procedures.

[14] Initial attempts at gathering a sample of black and Latina women did not yield many Latinas, primarily because of research limitations. I am not of Latino heritage, was not fluent in Spanish, and my resources were constrained to limit much of my fieldwork to events that were predominantly black or black and Latina.

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master's degree or higher. The respondents' occupations vary considerably and include physician, exotic dancer, professional football player, electrician, secretary, police sergeant, nonprofit organization director, and attorney. Education, income, and occupation were taken together to create a composite measure of socioeconomic status: 45 percent of my respondents are categorized as working class, 42 percent as middle class, and 13 percent as upper-middle class. There are three types of households in the study: partnered with children (40 percent of respondents), partnered without children (34 percent), and single-mother families (26 percent of respondents). Seventy-four percent of women are cohabiting with a partner, and those relationships have a mean length of 3.7 years (SD = 3.1). Sixty-four percent are currently parenting or coparenting at least one child, and 45 percent are biological mothers.[15]

New York contains many distinct well-developed lesbian communities, and one consequence of these varied social groups is that women enter into a gay identity or form friendships among gay people who may not be lesbian-feminists. Women can become socialized into lesbian communities that are not based on specific feminist principles, which might be the case in neighborhoods and communities where the primary gay public organizations have a political focus. Moreover, many of these groups are segregated by race and ethnicity, facilitating the development of a gay identity in the context of a racially homogeneous environment. As a result, being gay is not experienced as an identity in and of itself that creates social distance from one's racial group or that is associated with a particular political ideology. In New York one can be gay and still remain connected to one's own ethnic and cultural groups (Hawkeswood 1996; Battle and Bennett 2005).

In the black lesbian communities of New York, demographic characteristics are insufficient markers of difference. Black gay women use specific modes of gender expression to organize their social relationships. Traditional demographic characteristics like age and education are only a small part in a series of other relevant characteristics. Physical representations of gender, indicated by clothing, hair, physical stance, the presence or absence of makeup, and various other symbols, are extremely important markers of identification. People's style of clothing lets others in the community know right away how they choose to represent their gender, as well as the type of physical representation they are attracted to: more

[15] According to the 2000 census, 58 percent of black female same-sex couples in the New York City metropolitan area are raising children in their households (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2004).

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feminine-looking women tend to partner with women who do not look as feminine.

Three physical presentations of gender: Femme, gender-blender, and transgressive

In this study, I measured physical presentation of gender in three ways. First, there are a series of items on the mail-in survey asking the respondent to rate her own physical attributes, the physical attributes of her current mate, and the physical attributes of her ideal mate on a scale from one to ten, with one being very feminine and ten being very masculine. I recoded these items to create three categories of gender display: femmes score between one and three, gender-blenders score between four and six, and transgressives score between seven and ten. These categories represent physical style and mannerisms and are separate from items measuring personality traits and interaction styles (see app. A).[16]

I also measured physical presentation of gender by asking a series of open-ended questions in the in-depth interview about how the respondent perceives her own gender display, whether the type of person she might be attracted to influences how she dresses, how she decided on a style that was comfortable for her, and how she feels about labels for different presentations of gender (see app. B). I also capture gendere presentation through my own observations of how individuals dressed and the mannerisms they displayed over a period of approximately thirty months at lesbian social events that varied from a formal banquet to a laid-back Friday night card party in someone's home. I examined their style in relation to those of their partners and in relation to those of other lesbians in the community.

About half of the sample (48 percent) are femmes or feminine women, and they have a presentation of self that is consistent with what this literature has found for other femme lesbians: they wear dresses or skirts, form-fitting jeans, tops that are low cut or that show cleavage, makeup, jewelry, and accessories such as a purse or high-heeled shoes that display a sense of femininity. This gender presentation is limited to how they look physically and is not necessarily connected to any specific personality traits or ideologies about gender or gender display.

Gender-blender is a style related to but distinct from an androgynous

[16] JoAnn Loulan (1990) reminds us that lesbians have long used versions of this scale in informal ways to evaluate the gender presentations of themselves and others in gay communities.

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presentation of self. Thirty-four percent of the respondents fit into this category. Rather than a de-emphasis on femininity or masculinity, gender-blenders combine specific aspects of both to create a unique look. They usually wear certain men's clothing like pants or shoes, combined with something less masculine like a form-fitting shirt or a little makeup. Sometimes their clothes are not specifically men's clothes but are tailored, conservative women's items worn in a less feminine style.

While androgynous women are often stereotyped as looking very similar to one another with men's plaid shirts, buzz cuts or short hair, no makeup, and comfortable shoes or boots, many different styles are portrayed among minority gender-blending women. Younger gender-blenders who hang out in the East Village might wear t-shirts underneath button-down men's shirts layered over cargo shorts and flat 1970s-style PRO-Keds sneakers in a look similar to what is often worn by male skateboarders. Gender-blenders from Brooklyn might pair brightly colored dashiki tops with jeans and wear their hair in twists or some other natural style. Or you might see the standard urban uniform of a crisp white t-shirt, baggy blue jeans, fresh white uptown sneakers, and a long ponytail underneath a fitted Yankees baseball cap sported by Puerto Rican gender-blenders from Harlem or the Bronx.

What unites these different fashions as a group is that the style is specifically nonfeminine. The clothes are worn in a masculine style and presentation, though hips, hair, and breasts often signal that these are women's bodies. Some in the community label this presentation of self as *femme-aggressive*, which does not refer to a feminine woman with an outgoing or aggressive personality but a cross between a feminine gender display and the masculine gender display sometimes labeled *aggressive* in this community (see n. 2). Gender-blenders are not necessarily marked as lesbians in today's mainstream society because there is so much variation in styles of dress for women. When among heterosexuals they resemble tomboys or straight women who are not very feminine. It is mainly in the context of a lesbian environment that the gendered identity of gender-blenders becomes apparent. Gender-blenders tend to partner with more feminine-looking women.

Transgressive women scored at least a seven on the scale. Eighteen percent of the respondents fit into this category. They usually wear men's clothes and shoes and coordinate these outfits with heavy jewelry, belts with large, masculine buckles, and ties or suspenders for a more dressed-up look. Clothes are never form fitting, and this is a clear way to distinguish between a femme and a transgressive who are both dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt. Their hair might be dredlocked, braided in a cornrow

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style that is close to the head, or worn very short. Women in this category might have been called studs in a previous generation or butch in the predominantly white women's community, in that they use the female body as the site for signifying masculinity (Halberstam 1998). Most black lesbians I spoke with were not as comfortable calling themselves or the women they desired butch or stud. Some did not want to label them at all, while others reluctantly used the term *aggressive* to indicate a woman who does not look feminine. When asked, "How do you feel about labels like femme, or aggressive, or butch?" Morgan Banner, a forty-two-year-old mid-level manager woman from Staten Island, said, "I hate butch, I hate butch. I don't mind aggressive, and I don't mind femme because I think those categories fit. I mean people at my job, they don't know my lifestyle but they tell me all the time, 'You're very aggressive.' Because it is a standpoint you take. I don't take no shit, I do what I gotta do and as an aggressive person, I feel like there is nothing I can't do if I put my mind to it." When she was asked, "So, if you had to choose a label you would label yourself?" Morgan replied, "as being very aggressive." To the question, "What is it about your style of dress or personality that makes you say that?" Morgan responded, "Well I shop—I wear men's clothes." When asked, "Oh, you only wear men's clothes. Do you shop at men's stores?" she affirmed, "Only men's stores."

I have defined this gender presentation as transgressive because women in this group transgress notions of femininity, because many do not like or use the term *butch*, and because *transgressive* is linguistically similar to the term *aggressive*, which many black lesbians use to denote a woman with a masculine gender display. While some women identify a masculine style as well as an assertive, dominant personality as components of a transgressive presentation of self, this link with personality is largely a reflection of how women within that category believe they *should* behave. In practice, the relationship between physical presentation and interaction style is not at all clear. Many women with a gender-blender or transgressive presentation declare that they also have an assertive personality but sheepishly admit that their partners might say differently. Morgan later noted that although she thinks of herself as having an aggressive, dominant personality, her mate calls her "girly" because she enacts certain emotional responses and other qualities stereotypically associated with femininity: "Sometimes she [partner Shaniqua Banner] teases me and says I'm kind of girly.[17] She says I'm kind of feminine because sometimes I pluck my

[17] In this study, working-class lesbians were more likely to share the same surname of the less feminine partner, although without a legal name change.

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eyebrows or because of how I used to wear my hair. She says that I'm kindhearted and I'm so soft. . . . In the house I'm one person and outside, she says, 'You put on a front outside. You try to act all hard and then you are all soft here.' I mean, I water up [cry], I'm sensitive. My eyes tear when I'm real emotional, so she says, 'Oh, that makes you femme. You're femme.'"

Morgan's comments juxtapose two images of the transgressive as both assertive and masculine in appearance, with an undercover sensitive, emotional, and therefore "feminine" expression. Her partner's comment—"you put on a front outside. You try to act all hard and then you are all soft here"—implies that Morgan's willingness to show a more vulnerable side of herself only takes place in certain physical locations ("here," meaning inside the home) and in private emotional spheres ("here" within this relationship). It suggests that there are limited places where Morgan feels comfortable expressing these types of feelings, and it implies their association with a traditionally feminine presentation of self. However, the majority of respondents repeatedly distinguished between having a transgressive style of dress and a dominant or forceful personality, saying that the two are separate and do not have to act in tandem. For example, Evangelina Tarcel, a thirty-seven-year-old paralegal, said the following: "I have an aggressive nature but I love my high heels and my lipstick and my eye makeup and my cleavage showing. But if I see something I like, you'd better believe I am going over there to ask her her name [chuckles]."

Transgressive women were no more likely than were feminine or gender-blending women to report a very assertive or aggressive interaction style, measured as a score of seven or higher on the personality scale (app. A). Traits such as straightforwardness, assertiveness, being highly emotional, or being a particularly rational thinker did not reveal themselves in any consistent way with the three gender display categories. Moreover, the link that has historically been made between a masculine presentation of self and the role as sexual aggressor in the relationship was very ambiguous in this work and seemed to be a relic from a previous period that these lesbians did not take seriously. Gender-blenders and transgressive women often joked about their partner having the more aggressive sexual appetite or admitted wanting not only to give but also to receive sexual pleasure from their partners.

The three gender display categories I have defined contain some overlap. Women who scored a seven out of ten on the physical presentation of gender scale might be considered gender-blenders or transgressives, depending on a mix of style, symbols, and mannerisms. And while in most cases the researcher and respondent's report of the respondent's gender

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display category matched, in 20 percent of the cases the researcher reported a category that was different from the respondent's self-report. This discrepancy was mainly found among middle-class and upper-middle-class lesbians, who were the least likely on the survey to report a nonfeminine presentation of self, despite responses in the in-depth interviews that suggested otherwise. My gender display categories are not fixed—women may move further to the left or right on the scale or modify their gender presentation over time as their tastes change. However, an individual's change in gender display is not random and does not vary from day to day. When women do shift categories, it is usually for one of four reasons: they have recently come to identify as gay and are negotiating the type of gender display that feels most comfortable, they move from one geographic lesbian community to another and adopt new styles or variations consistent with the new locale, they enter a new relationship and take on a gender presentation that is oppositional to the new partner's gender display, or they exit gay communities and take on a heterosexual (and more feminine) presentation of self.

Uses of gendered categories in black lesbian life

It is not at all common, and in fact very unusual, to see both lesbians in a black couple dress in a masculine style. During the time I spent studying black lesbian groups in New York, I never came across a black couple where both partners had a strong nonfeminine gender display.[18] As Trina Adams commented earlier, "In most relationships there is one that is more feminine than the other. For some reason that is just the way it is. I've never seen two aggressives together. I've seen two feminine women living together, but one is always more aggressive." Sometimes both partners in a relationship have a feminine presentation of self when one is just entering into a gay identity and still developing her own sense of style. Elizabeth Anderson, a thirty-three-year-old gender-blender who works in accounting, shared how her gender display changed over time. She thinks lesbians develop a certain gender presentation once they spend time in the community. She says that when you first come out, "you're just 'being gay,' you don't realize how the community is." In the newness of spending time in gay social circles, what she noticed first were the nonfeminine women: "You might think that everybody looks like a boy and you're the only one who looks like a girl. But then you see that some people look

[18] This state of affairs is unlike that of the white couple portrayed on the cover of Maureen Sullivan's (2004) *The Family of Women*, where both women look similarly nonfeminine.

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like girls, some people look like boys, and some people are in the middle. So you will pick something that you are comfortable with." Elizabeth said that when she first came out she wore feminine clothes to social events because that is how she used to dress for social occasions in the heterosexual world. However, with a feminine gender display mostly nonfeminine women were drawn to her. She wanted to attract feminine-looking women and learned to change her clothing and adopt a more masculine style, saying that "feminine girls are usually not attracted to other feminine girls, so you've got to be a little more aggressive-looking to get the feminine girls." In constructing a gender-blending self, Elizabeth said she also found this style to more closely reflect the way she feels inside. She is divorced but says even when she was married to her ex-husband she never had a very feminine style, and the pictures from her married life support this recollection. So participating in the black lesbian social world gave her the freedom to "be herself," as she put it, by dressing in a nonfeminine way, and it also rewarded her with the attention of feminine women, who found that gender display highly desirable.

This work finds that black lesbians in New York use gender display to structure social interactions, and the order of these social interactions maintains social control in the community. In order to attract a person with a certain gendered style, one must possess a complementary gender display. However, the structure imposed by these norms also grants women a certain agency or freedom to present themselves in a gendered way if they so desire, and that is different from the expectations in many lesbian-feminist social circles that encourage a look that is not overtly feminine or masculine. In black lesbian environments, lesbians like Elizabeth as well as Asa, quoted earlier, feel liberated by these categories of gender display, especially the gender-blender identity, because they allow for a way to express a nonfeminine gendered self and to have that identity valued by other gay women.

In today's society, women have a significant range of styles that are considered acceptable, so the categories of femme, gender-blender, and transgressive have the most meaning when they are presented in a context where lesbians are present. It is in the larger group of black lesbians that the subtleties that often accompany a femme or gender-blending presentation of self are made clear. Athletic jerseys and baggy jeans on women as they walk down 125th Street in Harlem or Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn do not immediately mark them as lesbian but reveal their membership in a gender display category once they step into a convention center or nightclub filled with black lesbians.

I have seen transgressive women spend an inordinate amount of time

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selecting just the right men's shirt or blazer or having a jacket tailored to fit their female bodies in a specific way while still retaining the clothing's masculine look. These experiences call up images of Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis's 1950s butch women as they dressed to go out to the bars in Buffalo, New York (1993). However, styles that appear tough or cool among certain groups can also take on other negative or pejorative responses when they become associated with a particular raced or classed stereotype of masculinity. Women's sense of sexuality is structured as much by raced cultural norms as by lesbian standards (Moraga 1983), and the type of clothes that femmes, gender-blenders, and transgressives choose represent certain definitions of femininity and masculinity that become raced when nonwhite women participate in them. When black lesbians take on these forms of gender display, they run the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about black women's sexuality and subject themselves to dangerous confrontations with a larger society that devalues any raced expression of sexuality but particularly denounces and denigrates images of masculinity in black women. Transgressive presentations of self also reify stereotypes of black women as mannish and are particularly threatening to the male possession of masculinity. Thus, women who dress in a transgressive or gender-blending style may be reluctant to admit publicly that they have a nonfeminine presentation of self. As a result of their gender display, many face hostility from conformists in mainstream society, including middle-class black lesbians.

Class influences on gender presentation

There are important differences according to socioeconomic status in how lesbians relate these categories of gender presentation to their own lives. While middle- and upper-middle-class women also expressed feminine, gender-blending, and transgressive gender displays, they were also the least likely to acknowledge the types of pairings that exist between feminine and nonfeminine women and the most reluctant to support the idea of a transgressive presentation of self. Consider the perspective of Josephine Owens, a thirty-nine-year-old Legal Aid attorney. She defines her style as "pretty casual," saying, "I wouldn't call myself really feminine." She does not like to put on makeup or wear dresses, says that she has never carried a pocketbook, and shows other symbols that suggest a gender-blender identity. When I asked Josephine how she feels about labels like femme or butch, she gave a long pause, then said, "I don't like people to label folks—I mean people are who they are. Unfortunately we do [label] everything, but I don't like the labels at all. People are who they are and that's just it. As

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long as they're nice and decent people, that's all that really matters to me." When I asked if she would be able to choose a label for herself, she had difficulty answering the question. "For myself?" she asked, and I responded, "For yourself. Where would you fit in if you had to choose a label, or is it that you just don't think any of them apply to you?" Josephine paused, then asked in a defensive tone, "What are the labels?" "Well, I don't know," I said. "There are all of these different ways to—" "Yeah I don't think—" she interrupted, "I wouldn't want to be labeled anything. I wouldn't want to, I couldn't choose one for myself."

Josephine's partner of ten years is Marissa Dillard, a thirty-nine-year-old woman with a very feminine gender display. Earlier in the interview I asked Josephine about the types of women she was attracted to when she was single, and if there were particular characteristics such as race, education, the way she dressed, or other such things she looked for in a woman; she said, "I guess the way she looked. I mean education really doesn't matter to me. It was the way she looked. I liked a more, I guess I should say I don't like the 'butchy' kind. I like the feminine, semifeminine kind of woman. So, it's more of the way she looked. The way she dressed, I mean I'm not a great dresser myself, so that doesn't really matter." Josephine was able to think of labels when describing the type of gender display she is attracted to. She said that she would not call herself feminine, but when I later asked about her own gender presentation she became defensive and said she did not know what the labels were and would not give herself a label. She avoided having to name her own nonfeminine gender display, actively resisting a construction of herself as falling outside of mainstream gender ideologies.

Many black highly educated lesbians are reluctant to claim labels or membership in categories that are marked in larger society as deviant or are perceived in a negative way. Evelynn M. Hammonds (1997) argues that black women, in an effort to retaliate against the pathological image of black women's sexuality, have often promoted a public silence about sexuality and proper morality. In the case of nonfeminine lesbians, cultural notions of black female sexuality may inhibit their freedom of gender expression in certain contexts and disrupt the image of middle-class respectability they have achieved through other symbols of their socioeconomic mobility. As black women, many feel that they have to work harder to be accepted in mainstream society, and admitting a nonfeminine gender display categorizes them as "other" in yet another way by confirming pejorative conceptualizations of the black bulldagger and other stereotypes of black female sexuality (Collins 2000).

Particular transgressive presentations of self were harshly criticized, not

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only by larger society but also by black middle-class lesbians. At parties, women who wore athletic jerseys, do-rags on their heads, or baseball caps were said to lower the quality or status of the event, and other lesbians would react to their presence in a visibly negative way. Flyers announcing the latest party would often include the following warning: "No caps, do-rags, or athletic wear: Dress to impress." I once hosted a party for women of color at a lounge in Greenwich Village, and a few of the women who attended were dressed in athletic jerseys and fitted caps. Other than their style of dress, they did not stand out in any obvious way or behave differently from the other guests. However, throughout the night several women complained that I had "let those type of people" into the party. They said things like, "they bring the party down"; "we work so hard to get away from them, only to have them turn up at a classy event like this one." The harshest critics were usually middle-class gender-blending lesbians who wanted to be distinguished from this particular masculine expression of black sexuality.

When transgressive lesbians appropriate certain representations of masculinity owned by black and Latino men, they portray images that are raced, classed, and associated with violence and menace. Debra Wilson presents transgressive lesbians' experiences with this image in her 2003 award-winning documentary *Butch Mystique*. Some lesbians resent this presentation of self in other women because it is associated with an image of men who are disrespectful to women. Others with a disadvantaged background may be trying to distance themselves from a style that signifies membership or identification with lower-class life. But many feminine women are attracted to this type of masculinity on a female body, finding the image of a hip-hop "bad boy" alluring or cool when modified and transplanted on a woman.

There are dangers in representing black masculinity, particularly through the female form. First, transgressive women are rebelling against strong conventional norms, and their emphasis on self-expression above conformity attacks the core of male dominance and invites openly punitive responses from others. But more than that, a nonfeminine gender presentation in women may cause men to question the meaning of their own masculinity. Lexington (Lex), a thirty-nine-year-old working-class woman, said that on an almost daily basis she and other transgressives are discriminated against and denied their basic civil rights. "People call us out [of] our names, threaten us, all because of who we are and what we look like, what we represent." When I asked Lex why she thinks men respond to her and other transgressives in such a negative way, she paused, then said, "Because they've spent their whole lives with one idea of who they are, and then

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they look at us with our men's shirts, our men's shoes, and realize *gender is something that is taught*."

That black transgressives consistently partner with women who are more feminine and whose style is consistent with heterosexual standards of beauty also endangers male ownership of masculinity and the benefits that go along with it. Lex says that lesbians are threatening to all men but white men in particular because "they are the gold standard, the epitome of success, of what everyone in society aspires to have. We are a threat to them because we are not supposed to be able to get what they have. Not just aggressives but other women out there, too. How dare we own our own homes, have cars, raise families, and pull a woman that looks as good as theirs!" The raced and classed masculinity that exists simultaneously among black transgressive and gender-blending women can be dangerous because of the often hostile and untrusting environment that exists for black men in society. The enactment of dress and mannerisms that are consistent with particular male presentations of self are learned in disadvantaged environments or through images of male rappers and hip-hop performers and are also subject to harassment from police, distrust from strangers, and efforts by members of the middle class to distance themselves from the group.

Gender presentation and gender ideologies

In trying to understand how black lesbians are negotiating the organization and meaning of gender display, I found that it is desire, not feminism or politics, that takes center stage. As I conducted this research, it became obvious to me that some feminist ideologies have profoundly influenced these women's lives, particularly with regard to how they have come to understand their own oppression based on their structural location as black women and as black lesbians. The calculated, nonrandom use of gender display suggests they are enacting a public, visible manifestation of women who are in control of their own sexuality, and it represents behavior that is at the very core of a philosophy of women's liberation. Nevertheless, their sexual identities, by and large, are not rooted in a particular feminist politics. When I asked Katrice Webster, a thirty-seven-year-old corporate attorney, if her lesbian identity is tied to feminism, she said that in her mind one has very little to do with the other. Most women, when asked if their sexuality was tied to feminism, said they had not consciously linked the two. Some women have a masculine presentation of self, are primarily attracted to feminine women, and also hold feminist beliefs about eradicating gender inequality. There are also transgressive, gender-blender, and femme women who would like their partners to take on some of the more traditionally

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female or male roles in relationships. Women who practice all three gender displays are able to distinguish between a gendered expression of self and their political beliefs about gender.

The lesbians in this study also make a distinction between style or mannerisms that define masculinity, on the one hand, and the gendered privileges and dominance that men tend to garner, on the other. The ability to appreciate or emulate a particular way of dressing that is masculine does not preclude transgressives or gender-blenders from seeing themselves as women in a society where men still have the greater advantage. They believe that men are constantly granted more status and authority because society continues to advance an ideology that privileges male leadership of important societal institutions and that awards men an earnings advantage that sometimes facilitates their partners' economic dependence. As women, lesbians do not benefit from either of these gendered structural advantages, so relationships organized around gender display do not provide a gendered economic advantage for the less feminine partner.

In the past, butch-femme roles eroticized and structured sexual interactions around the principle of gender difference. Gender presentation is defined more broadly now and is no longer primarily a means of structuring sexual interactions. However, it does continue to structure membership in and the organization of the lesbian social world. Black women take very careful pains to consistently present the same type of gender display because they are looking to create a particular aesthetic self and because the norms of the community require a consistency in their gender presentation. The structure imposed by community social norms becomes problematic when it impedes a person's freedom to partner with someone who has the "wrong" gender display. However, the use of gender display also liberates many lesbians by allowing a sense of freedom in their ability to express their individuality in a way that is specifically feminine or nonfeminine.

A closer examination of nonblack lesbian community life will most likely reveal similar patterns and meanings of gender presentation and similar organization of lesbian relationships, particularly among women who separate their political ideologies about gender and other issues from their identities as lesbians. A question that follows concerns how to relate differences in physical representations of gender and class to broader understandings of gender roles in same-sex relationships and gender expression in broader society. Connected to this point is a need to know how individuals conceptualize gay identity in the context of other important overlapping identities such as race, gender, and motherhood. The present study recognizes these points and initiates a dialogue between overlapping areas of study.

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Appendix A
Physical Presentation of Gender Scale and Personality Scale

On a scale from one to ten, with "1" being a person whose PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES including clothing, hair, style of dress, way of walking, or way of talking are "very feminine" and consistent with those stereotypically assigned to women, and "10" being a person whose clothing, hair, style of dress, way of walking, and way of talking are "very masculine" or most like those stereotypically assigned to men, which number best represents YOUR OWN physical attributes?

The physical attributes of YOUR MATE?

The IDEAL attributes of someone you would be attracted to?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Very "feminine"			Somewhere in-between "feminine" and "masculine"					Very "masculine"	

Now, on a different scale from one to ten, with "1" representing someone whose PERSONALITY and interaction style with others would be considered laid back, quiet, or introverted, and "10" representing someone who might be thought of as outgoing, expressive, or extroverted in social interactions with others, which number best represents YOUR OWN interaction style?

The personality or interaction style of YOUR MATE?

The IDEAL personality or interaction style of someone you would be attracted to?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Laid back/ introverted			Somewhere in-between laid back and outspoken					Outgoing/extroverted	

Appendix B
Portions of Interview Protocol That Identifies Respondent's Evaluation of Her Own Gender Presentation and the Characteristics of Someone She Would Like to Attract

If you had to define your sexuality, how would you define it?

On your survey, when asked to define your sexuality, you said you were __. What is it about your experiences with women and men that made you answer the question in that way?

How did you come into "the life"? What were those first experiences like for you? What kind of person were you interested in attracting?

Did the kind of person you were looking for influence the way that you dressed?

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How did you decide on a style that is comfortable for you?
How do you feel about labels like *femme*, *aggressive*, or *butch*?
Where do you think you would fit in if you had to choose a label? What about your style of dress or personality makes you say that?
Are you happy with the way that the two of you divide household responsibilities? How does that work for you two?
Are you happy with the way that the two of you manage the bills and savings you have? How does that work for you two?
Do you ever feel yourself taking on certain gender roles when you interact with your mate?

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